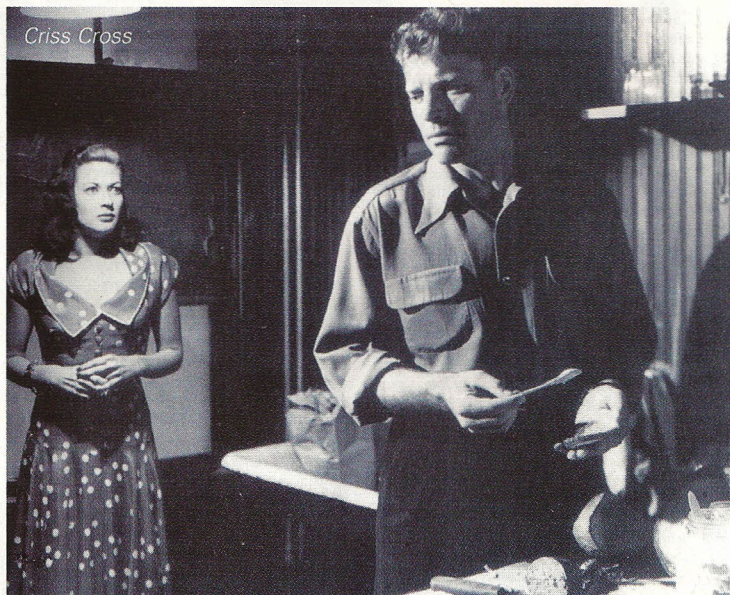


Double Indemnity



Criss Cross

Edge of night

Film noir and style go hand in hand. Everything else, for the most part, feels separated.

More movement than genre, film noir is an historical label conversant to a particular kind of low budget movie released by Hollywood during, and more commonly after, World War 2. Produced on modest budgets and shot in black and white, film noir often reflects a despairing view of an insular world where the moral degradation of characters is played out against an unforgiving urban landscape. Melding the hardboiled attitude of the literary tradition with an atmosphere as much about mood as it was anxiety, film noir can be seen as an aesthetic reaction and progression to German Expressionism, with its striking photographic effects, baroque production design and nocturnal settings.

These often tightly plotted, slickly shot evocations of the neon wilderness with its rain slicked streets, oblique shadows, smoky barrooms, bored temptresses, black widows, private eyes, cuckolded husbands, escaped convicts and runaway wives, exist in a field of space favouring depth, chiaroscuro and heightened symbolism. Style permeates everything from the dialogue to the placement of the camera, which is fixed at times at the hardest angles.

Interiors are mostly claustrophobic; exteriors amplify the alienating environment, one that dwarfs the characters whose associations, if not associates,

are for the most part of the criminal variety. In film noir the currency is fast talk, money and guns. Of course the exchanges between the characters are cynical, the words delivered in staccato bursts laden with sexual innuendo; the subtext usually calculated according to the laws of desire, lust and greed. The literary pedigree of movies like *The Big Sleep* ("I'm not kidding, but let's say that I am...") and *Double Indemnity* ("I tried to hold myself together, but I could feel my nerves pulling me to pieces,") underscores the streamline editorialising. Call it the tabloid sensibility of the storytelling. Effects are achieved almost effortlessly,



This Gun For Hire



The Killers



Kiss Me Deadly

especially those contributed by the actors. Some of the best films noirs are just so because of the chemistry of its stars. Couplings create kinship, and more often than not fireworks: Bogart and Bacall, Andrews and Tierney and Ladd and Lake. Meanwhile sociopaths create conflict. Dan Duryea, Robert Ryan and Richard Widmark, fine actors all, offered differing albeit unforgettable portraits of those pitiless figures soon to be engulfed by the shadows.

Whatever these pictures lacked in financing, they more than compensated for in style.

The French echoes of its branding refer to its dark qualities both formal and thematic. For this reason the projects naturally attracted stylists, many

of whom were European émigrés themselves, having escaped the war. Billy Wilder (*Double Indemnity*),

Anthony Mann (*T-Men*) Otto Preminger (*Fallen Angel*), Robert Siodmak (*Criss Cross*), Andre de Toth (*Pitfall*) and Fritz Lang (*Scarlet Street*), each contributed one or more seminal movies to the film noir canon to match the greatest work by their American colleagues Robert Aldrich (*Kiss, Me Deadly*), Nicholas Ray (*In a Lonely Place*), Robert Wise (*The Set-Up*) and Orson Welles whose *Touch of Evil*, although commonly acknowledged as the end of the noir movement, opens, fittingly, with one of the greatest shots in film history.

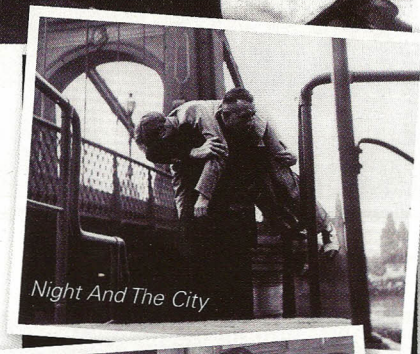
Noir is littered with remarkable sequences and images. Edward G. Robertson painting the toes

of Joan Bennett is *Scarlet Street*, the cab ride in *Dark Passage*, the entrance of Martha Vickers in *The Big Sleep*, the aerial photography of *The Naked City*, the heady and orgasmic jazz jam in *Phantom Lady*, the chilling first hit in *This Gun For Hire*, the use of perspective in *The Lady in the Lake*, to name only a few. *Kiss Me, Deadly*, one of noir's highpoints, deposits many of the moments which are beloved from the movies of today, with the reverse scrawl of its opening credits (*Seven*), exploding beach front cabin (*Lost Highway*) and coveted mysterious goods (*Pulp Fiction*).

The disillusionment so intrinsic to the noir world, with its fallen heroes and love triangles,

emanates from crime and crimes of the heart. Doomed lovers populate this domain where choices – not

always smart – are made in the name of one last shot at unfulfilled love. The seductress is hard to conquer and harder to forget. Take a look at Jane Greer, Lana Turner Joan Bennett, Barbara Stanwyck and Mary Astor. A man ends up in a seedy hotel for a reason. Movies like *In a Lonely Place* and *Out of the Past*, dramatise the impossibility of love and the danger risked in its pursuit. Flashback and voice-over underline the obsessive forces at play in film noir where destiny is tormented by the past and life is viewed through the monochrome tinted prism of regret. A face without speaking can tell the story of fatalism. Take a look at Robert Mitchum. ■



Night And The City



In A Lonely Place

A Dirty Dozen

Dark Passage
The Big Sleep
Where the Sidewalk Ends
Kiss Me Deadly
In a Lonely Place
Woman in the Window
Scarlet Street
Pick Up on South Street
Touch of Evil
Criss Cross
The Killers
Double Indemnity